Natomas Oral Histories
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Oral interview of

Debi Randel

discussing the **Virgin Sturgeon**

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This is not a verbatim transcript. Parts of the interview have been paraphrased.

Debi Randel lived on a boat on the same dock as the Virgin Sturgeon.

Anne: Right not we're going to be talking with Debi Randel and getting her story when she was at the Virgin Sturgeon as a live-aboard. Okay, so you're going to chat with us a little bit about how you came to the Virgin Sturgeon. So, you had a boyfriend at that time, Danny Brown, so what happened then? You guys were together and he got a boat, or—

[00:00:36]
Debi: Yeah, we bought a houseboat and we were looking for a place to dock it to live on it.

Anne: How old were you at that time?

Debi: I was like 17 — 16 or 17, and he was 26, I think. And he met Tody somehow.

Anne: And Tody was the manager of the Sturgeon?

Debi: Yeah, at the time. We were docking the boat there. We weren't supposed to live on it per se, because they were just starting that no more live-aboards on the river, but they had a full dock of live-aboards there, so we kind of snuck in on that.

Anne: And so, I remember when we were talking last year sometime that you mentioned that it was really difficult to find a place on the river and so you guys were really excited that you were going to be allowed to have this place. Were you at all working on the Sturgeon?

Debi: No, I didn't work in the restaurant at all. I lived on the docks. I was driving a school bus at the time.

Anne: And then was Danny working for the restaurant?

Debi: No, he worked for Wayside Lumber Company.

Anne: Okay, so you were living over there. Did Danny become the harbor master or anything?

Debi: No, we were just live-aboards there. Marvin Buller was harbor master. After the restaurant sank, Tody was gone; I never saw her again. I don't know what happened to her.

Anne: You have that nice picture of her in that article with that cat.

[00:02:34]
Debi: That was the first time it sank that I knew of, when we lived there. It sank again later on just before they were going to have a big bash. They'd got all this imported beer. Oh, Battle of the Bands, I think is what it was going to be. They were going to have — the bands that usually played there were going to have a big concert there on the river. The night before, they just packed all this food and

alcohol onto the restaurant, and then Terry Dudley got up in the morning — he was Avis Newton's son — he'd golf, so he got up real early, and he walked the docks and the restaurant had sank. That was the last time it sank. Legally, they couldn't do anything with all the food and beer. They couldn't use it once it'd been underwater, even though it was still bottled, so the docks stayed drunk for months on all the alcohol. We dove inside the restaurant to get the alcohol out. The grease from the deep-fat fryers had floated up to the top — you could see it in the windows. That is where they found the cat. It was real spooky.

Anne: One of the times it sank, I guess, was the time it was going to be their second anniversary party.

Debi: That must've been the Battle of the Bands.

[00:04:23]
Anne: So, they had loaded up the place, and what Gennie recalls is that they were able to use all the wine and beer — the bottles weren't open. Even though the labels were removed, they used it on the levee in the beer garden.

Debi: I don't remember them using it. I just remember everybody was drunk on the docks for a while. I don't remember them using it up at the beer garden. I remember them rescheduling and putting a thing up on the levee, and that's when the beer garden started.

Anne: Yes, that's what Gennie remembers. She said that Marvin had to drywall the inside of the shed to make it usable. She says that they found a restaurant downtown that would make them sandwiches that had sprouts in them.

Debi: I remember the sprout sandwiches. I don't remember why or how they came, but I do remember the sprouts.

[00:06:06]
Anne: And so you, then, had arranged this party and had this party for Dan's birthday just prior to it sinking.

Debi: No, it burned. That was the new barge, the Sacramento Yacht Club. They were going to open it — I remember Dan's birthday party was like three days before it burned.

Anne: So, this was the yacht club barge. And that's when you had the party and that's when you made that cake that was so cute.

Debi: I remember that I was very young and didn't know how to cook.

Anne: Oh, it was so cute. You made the cake representing all the live-aboard boats. So what was the stretch of time that you stayed there?

Debi: I'd just turned like 17, because I know I'd just started driving the school bus — 17 to 21, I think.

Anne: After the barge burned, did people still get to live in the harbor?

Debi: Yeah, it didn't have anything to do with the restaurant. I left when I ran off with Dan's cousin.

[00:08:08]
Anne: So did Dan still live in your boat? That's when you sold it to this Steve—

Debi: He sold it to the guy at work — that Steve Nieuman. And I never saw Dan after that.

Anne: So that was the end. So you were there for three years, right? Are there any other memories you have of the Sturgeon.

Debi: I have a lot of memories, a whole lot of memories.

Anne: I know that you gave us those copies [of photographs] of Pirate Jim, the pirate guy, and his boat.

Debi: And his goat. Coffee — that was his goat's name. He was a mean goat. And he had a bunch of little dogs and pigeons. He was a neat guy, he really was. He made all the furniture for the Sturgeon, all the pieces out back — real rustic. I think that was what the feud was over between him and the Sturgeon. I don't remember exactly the story, but apparently he thought that they owed him some more money or something for the furniture that he'd made. There were rumors that he was the one who kept sinking it and he was the one that torched it, but nothing was ever proven.

Anne: And Gennie feels like somebody in a rowboat with an oil can — what did she say?

Debi: They think that he torched it, but I don't know.

Anne: Nobody does know.

Debi: It could have been torched for a lot of reasons, and sank. Somebody else could have had a grudge.

Anne: And the sinking over here that occurred, that you also remember — you came at about that time — that one was because a big log went inside.

Debi: I don't remember that. I thought when it sank for the last time, just before the party, it was because they had put so much weight on it with the big preparation and everything, because they were expecting a big, big crowd. They just loaded the restaurant down with alcohol and food and then it sank.

[00:10:34]
Anne: What they discovered was that a branch, a big tree — she called the divers again, and they went down there, and they tried to raise it for a while, and that last time, they found that there was a big log that had gone into it, and it was unsealable — because it was so huge.

Debi: And I think it had rotted, too.

Anne: Yes, I'm sure there was more than just that one thing, but that was why they couldn't raise it. Let me turn this off just a second. [*Tape stops and restarts*] Here you've got a story that you're remembering about this catamaran that was over there.

Debi: Yeah, this old black lady, her name was Rosa May, a really nice lady — she had a huge catamaran on the outside dock. The Sturgeon was positioned kind of behind the government docks, so most of the debris that was headed for the restaurant would get kind of pushed to the side to go further out in the

river, because the government docks had that wall thing. It would send the logs right straight toward that outside dock, and that's where Rosa May's catamaran was. Those big logs would come down and get up under her boat and we'd all be out there in pouring-down rain trying to keep the logs from taking her boat down river. It was always exciting. I don't know whatever happened to Rosa May, but — big old catamaran out there.

[00:12:12]
Anne: So was she still there when you left?

Debi: When I left? Yeah, the boat was still there. She was an old lady and she would just come down there once in a while.

Anne: But that's where she docked it?

Debi: Yeah, her boat was there. I never saw her take it out. It just stayed there.

Anne: Isn't that interesting. So she never really rode on it?

Debi: I don't remember her ever taking it out. I mean, it was a great big catamaran — where are you going to sail it on the river?

Randee: What's a catamaran?

Debi: It's something you got to see. It's a great big sailboat and it's got three pontoons on it. So, all kinds of stuff would get caught up under her boat.